

## FEATURED PROSE

Daniel Juckes | Curtin University

### A straight track through a dark valley

The last time my grandmother and I went out together, we drove up the steep sides of Hebden Bridge to reach the roads which cross the moors at the top of Calderdale. I aimed the car at Oxenhope, and saw the mist come fingering its way over the starting valley, which sometimes spreads for miles and sometimes shuts you in. The mist crawled quickly, laid over the place, sheet-white, and brought the curves of the road closer, until each next corner became all there was. Then, out of the mist, a man appeared, waving at the road. There had been a crash, and the front of a silver car was torn open and buckled in; the car was up on the bank by the side of the road, halfway through a dry-stone wall at the edge of a field. ‘Terrible,’ said Grandma. The mist had kept its secret until the seconds it took to drive past.

By the time we got to Oxenhope—not long, it is just a few miles from Hebden—the hills and moors were spread once more. Clouds were set in rows and shifted between white and grey; thin bands of rain flickered off into the distance. We were going to catch the train, the old stream train which still runs between Oxenhope and Keighley, the one used in a filmed version of *The Railway Children*, which Grandma remembered. The station was small and old, and, she thought, quaint.

On the platform we shared a pot of tea in a repurposed carriage, until the engine chuffed up alongside us, and then we climbed on board as the clouds thickened again. The guard had to push a ramp off the stairs so that Grandma could lift herself up the metal gangway from behind the safety of her walker.

The steam sounded like rain, or even a kettle on the boil. It was not as loud as I thought it would be, and not as thick: more like mist or fog. Small, silver

puffs followed the engine until it hooked up with the carriages. Then, after a whistle and its answer, we shifted forwards out of the station, picking up speed. Rain fell, slanting across the windows, and Grandma fell asleep.

We were sat on blue, green, and purple checked velvet seats. All the finishings were wooden, neat, and a little worn. The carriage rocked from side to side. The walls next to the track were mossy and low, and over my right shoulder a small river wound through buttercupped fields. I thought of *The Waves*: ‘Down in the valley the train draws across the fields lop-eared with smoke.’<sup>1</sup>

The first stop was Haworth. The train pulled up at the less cobbled, less pretty end of town. Black engines sat in the sidings by the sheds, and coal was piled up in stalls. I saw the old iron gates of the station and the rain came harder. ‘I wonder where that is,’ said Grandma, who had woken when the train’s motion ceased.

Whistles blew again, and we rolled out and on; water leaked through the window and onto my arm; and the valley walls were steeper then, they closed us in. The steam from the engine curdled in the longer tunnels we passed through; it snuck through the windows. And I thought about the urge which makes people want to take this journey, which forces them to keep old stations open and steam trains running, and I watched Grandma sleep again.

The siding at Ingrow West was piled with rusted lamp posts, like the ones at Oxenhope but not painted and preserved, just rotting. The train cut through. There were chimneys, once-factories, green-flashed green-edged trees, lengths of wood, and bits of metal.

Keighley was the end of the line; it took only 20 minutes to get there. I leant out of the window and let the smoke and steam that lingered in the air fill my nose. I got off the train to go to a bathroom, which had black stalls and cold, white tiles. The engine eased off into the distance, so that it could come back and attach itself to the new front end of the train. The noise and steam were loud and thick and people appeared through white gusts of the latter. I got back on board.

‘Where are we now Key, er Chris, er ...’ ‘Keighley.’ ‘What time is it?’ The smoke and steam made the air taste like metal. The air tugged at the back of my throat. The steam, released when the train was docked, gushed from the

engine and the mist of it headed back down the tracks in the direction we had come, and the direction we had now to go. And of course this is all about tracks; about how—if we are lucky—we might grow old enough to tumble like a train gathering steam, breathing restless whistles, down a straight track through a dark valley. Ted Hughes calls it a river—but the idea is the same. For Hughes, time is a kind of dark river, flowing on, leading forwards, edging off and petering into the distance, always ‘Keeping ... strange depths alive and attached’.<sup>2</sup>

There were children playing in the carriage. Ink smudged down the page I was working on, and my pen bobbed on the petals of a poppy and on the white wisps of a blown away, stuffed-in bit of cottongrass I’d snaffled from the foot of Stoodley Pike and stored in my notebook.

Then the slow edge forward began again, but backwards, back towards Oxenhope. Each sleeper creaked; wood warped under the weight of the engine. A whistle sounded. We edged away, with water falling from the chinks in the window, watched by interested men from the platform. The buildings I could see close to the tracks stared through cracks in their windows, winked at the train. And, now the engine was closer to our carriage, I could hear the breaths of it; Grandma was asleep, and I could hear her breaths too.

The train panted and pulled, gained speed; the steam pushed upwards as we passed through it, but seemed to go backward. And the noise of the engine was a drum roll and the steam felt sharp in my throat, dry in my throat, and the table between us rocked and pulled my pen forward and backward, suggesting letters. Rusted bits of track were piled outside the windows and we were back at Ingrow West; the train exhaled. When stopped, it spoke in whispers.

Another whistle, and then off. Going backwards, it was darker and longer through some of the tunnels because the train gained speed at different times. Then, terraced houses in diagonal strips to the right. The river weaving. Newer houses, still in terraced strips even though the mills are broken, collapsed, or gone. Huge leaved plants low to the ground. Trees and thick nettles and ferns. Thistles. I saw the same things as before, but flipped backwards.

The steam clouded off, shapeshifted. It flew too fast to allow patterns. Piles of mossed over sleepers, slate grey and all surely useless, sat thick, concrete, and settled. The guard shouted ‘Oakworth!’ Doors slammed. Another

whistle. Cars were stopped at a level crossing; the windows of a dead factory stared starry-eyed; a man waved from a field; clouds floated by the tunnel we ran through and the fringed trees almost touched the train. Everything was shaped to the rolls and dips and cracks of the land, to the crevices of it, the steep v-shaped sides of the track running through blasted-out, false ravines. Haworth.

‘What have ya been writing over?’ said Grandma. ‘Just so I can remember where we’ve been,’ I replied. She sat, head on hands on table or arms folded, right over left, right in a fist, her veins showing through. Skin mottled like pale marble. There was a parked carriage, some black engines. Then back down the line and on, on to the next stop, the last stop, walled in by stone, by river, by valley walls. A whistle again. Oxenhope.

Back at the flat we boiled the kettle. ‘I’m glad to get back. It’d’ve been a lovely ride if it’d been decent.’ Rain fell the whole time, constant, sometimes drizzling, sometimes harder. ‘The rain spoils everything, dunt it?’ ‘The flamin’ weather.’ ‘I am glad I went, but ...’ then she felt tired and unwell, and she fell asleep.

There’s a moment in B.S. Johnson’s novel *Albert Angelo* when the narrator yells into the sky, directly at the reader, ‘Oh, fuck all this lying!’<sup>3</sup> I can remember little else of that book—except perhaps a very wet camping scene, and a small rectangle cut from the middle of a page, so that the reader can see ahead to the denouement.

Johnson puts his exclamation in caps, I’m sure. I won’t go that far. But I do need a moment like that, from which to take stock: the story I’ve pulled you from is true, as far as these things go, but it is also not true: it is a model I’ve used to proffer an interpretation of the universe. It is an attempt to manipulate time and space by turning words into objects, simply by putting them in order on the page.

The previous paragraphs had their impetus in a mixture of the banal, the manipulative, and the desperate. Most literally, perhaps, they were powered by an old story, written about a day in August 1934, which was kept folded up for over 80 years. The story was written about a long train journey taken by my great-grandparents. And, simply, I wanted to know what it would be like to ride the kind of train they took. So I suggested to Grandma—on one of the last days I spent with her in England—that we ride the heritage railway not far from where she lived.

I think, as well, I saw something in the way that old story was preserved: it represented a method by which I might keep something of my grandmother, in a way perhaps more vital than other methods of preservation. This kind of tale is not cryogenic, for example. But neither is it, I hope, pickled.

On writing and revising, I realised that those paragraphs had a genesis, too, in the fourth volume of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*—specifically, in a chapter called 'The Heart's Intermissions'. The chapter records the narrator's return to Balbec, a place on the coast of France where he travelled with his grandmother. Except, when 'The Heart's Intermissions' begins, he is back there without her. Her absence produces a kind of primal grief in him, and I, through my writing, have been able to process, and perhaps use, that kind of grief. 'The Heart's Intermissions' did not come into this work deliberately, but surreptitiously.

One of the funny things about my habit of writing down things like this, is the way I find myself pre-plotting the kind of moments which might make good essay fodder. I took the steam train journey with Grandma because I hoped it would leave me something to write about, as well as something to remember her by and time to be with her. This competition between a real kind of experience from which art comes, and one which I anticipated might make good art, is a difficult contradiction to think through. The truth is, if I had wanted to spend time with Grandma that day, I wouldn't have brought my notebook. But instead I wrote, and now I have this solid thing with which to remember my memories. The fading and partial nature of the experiences I choose to write about become, by this conscious pre-imagining, something even more fleeting, even if they, perhaps, will endure—like that story written on old paper that is my touchstone, and which Grandma kept for so many years. It's true, too, that I do feel under pressure to keep as much as I can. When I was with her, I tried to pay close attention to what Grandma did, and to how she did it. When she drank her tea she swallowed with a gulp followed by a small exhale; she held her cup in two hands and lifted it to her mouth while steam still whorled from the liquid. Her fingers were thick and there was a thin gold band on her ring finger; it looked fragile but was not. Her hair was tight to her head, if she had had it set properly. She used to squeeze her lips together and roll them around in circles, and then put her tongue into her cheeks and all around her teeth. When she coughed, the top half of her body bent over and her eyes closed, and she would lift her hand to her mouth with her fist open. And, always, she would look out of a window, see something turning, or a shadow forming—but even now I am caught a little, lying: sometimes she only saw a garden, or the rain. That dishonesty helps though: I couldn't bear to be without it because it lets me back a little.

There is a vitality to the past which I am yet to be able to articulate. My best guess is at something *like* chaos: that there is a strange, ineffable beauty in what we consider the present, and that those actions which occur in the moment are really something like the result of a transmission of data. But that would make the present merely a ruin, shaping itself again and again, and would mean that the past is where substance was—if it wasn't, once, the present itself, of course. In an essay called 'Against Sainte-Beuve', Proust sets up the case for an attempt to capture the past—that attempt being his monstrous novel, which spans more books than can be comfortably added to carry-on luggage. The opening paragraph to the essay—which is against Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, a literary critic of the nineteenth century—is surprisingly upfront, at least for me. But then, I struggled through *Within a Budding Grove*. The essay gives an important sense of what Proust believes is vital for a writer looking for ways to 'repossess something of our past impressions'.<sup>4</sup> The trick, Proust says, is to pay less heed to the intellect (whatever he means by that). Because, 'What the intellect gives us back under the name of the past is not it.'<sup>5</sup> Not the past, that is. We find that in other places. But my work, and his work—any kind of prose work—is inevitably one of the intellect. The trick, perhaps, is in the way or ways the intellect might be sidestepped. This chain of words—to twist a sentence of Lia Purpura's—is nothing more than the conscious creation *of* ruins. And, 'to ruin a thing, one must behave like time and weather, assume the prerogative of the elements.'<sup>6</sup> That is, one must erode, whittle, and give new essence to past impressions. This effort is nothing more than a cluttering of memories into one shape. It is a working of them into something, which, via the chemistry of the sentence, helps me see once more some of the strange depths alive and attached to a moment.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Daniel Jukes is a writer from Perth, Western Australia. He is a sessional academic at Curtin University, from where he holds a PhD in Creative Writing, and he works at *Westerly* magazine as Administrative Editor. His creative and critical work has been published in journals such as *Axon*, *Life Writing*, *M/C Journal*, *TEXT*, and *Westerly*.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> V. Woolf. (1931/1968). *The Waves*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes. 'The Dark River'. *Elmet*. London: Faber & Faber. (First published as *Remains of Elmet*. Photographs by Fay Godwin.). 13.

<sup>3</sup> B.S. Johnson. (1964/2004). *Albert Angelo*. London: Constable. 163.

<sup>4</sup> Proust, M. (1988/1994). *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*. John Sturrock (Trans.). London: Penguin Books. 3. (Original work unpublished).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>6</sup> L. Purpura. (2006). 'Falling Houses: mise-en-scene'. *On Looking: Essays*. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books. 86.